**Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**World History**

**Great Man Theory**

The **Great Man Theory** was a popular 19th century idea according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of "great men", or heroes: highly influential individuals who, due to either their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom, or Machiavellianism utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact.

The theory was popularized in the 1840s by Thomas Carlyle, and in 1860 Herbert Spencer formulated a decisive counter-argument that remained influential throughout the 20th century; Spencer said that such great men are the products of their societies, and that their actions would be impossible without the social conditions built before their lifetime.[1][2][3]

For example, a scholarly follower of the Great Man theory would be likely to study the Second World War by focusing on the big personalities of the conflict – Sir Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Charles de Gaulle (Allies); Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, (Axis); et al. – and view all of the historical events as being tied directly to their own individual decisions and orders.

**Introduction**

The Great Man Theory is associated most often with 19th-century commentator and historian Thomas Carlyle, who commented that "The history of the world is but the biography of great men," reflecting his belief that heroes shape history through both their personal attributes and divine inspiration.[4] In his book On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History, Carlyle set out how he saw history as having turned on the decisions of "heroes", giving detailed analysis of the influence of several such men (including Muhammad, Shakespeare, Luther, Rousseau, and Napoleon). Carlyle also felt that the study of great men was "profitable" to one's own heroic side; that by examining the lives led by such heroes, one could not help but uncover something about one's true nature.[5]

In *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche writes that: "...the goal of humanity lies in its highest specimens" [2].

**Criticisms**

One of the most vitriolic critics of Carlyle's formulation of the Great Man theory was Herbert Spencer, who believed that attributing historical events to the decisions of individuals was a hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific position. [6] He believed that the men Carlyle called "great men" were merely products of their social environment.

“[Y]ou must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown....Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.”

—-Herbert Spencer, The Study of Sociology[7]

The editors of the influential 18th century French encyclopedia *Encyclopedie* were ideologically opposed to biographies because they believed too much ink had already been spilled on hagiographies of church fathers and deeds of kings, and not enough about the average person or life in general. To this end *Encyclopedie* had almost no biography articles. However, this policy was contentious among the encyclopedists and so some biographies were "hidden" inside articles;[8] for example, the article on Wolstrope (Woolsthorpe), England is almost entirely about the life of the 17th century scientist Isaac Newton.[9]

Answer neatly!

1. What is the Great Man Theory? Try to describe it in your own words.
2. To “popularize” something means to make it well-known. Who popularized the Great Man Theory?
3. When was the Great Man Theory popularized?
4. Who gave a counter-argument to Carlyle?
5. What was that counter-argument?
6. In the 4th paragraph it says (near the end): “Carlyle also felt that the study of great men was ‘profitable’ to one’s own heroic side; that by examining the lives led by such heroes, one could not help but uncover something about one’s true nature.” What does this mean?
7. In the 6th paragraph, it says that Herbert Spencer thought that saying that historical events were because of great individuals was “hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific.” According to this sentence, does Herbert have a positive or negative opinion of the Great Man Theory?